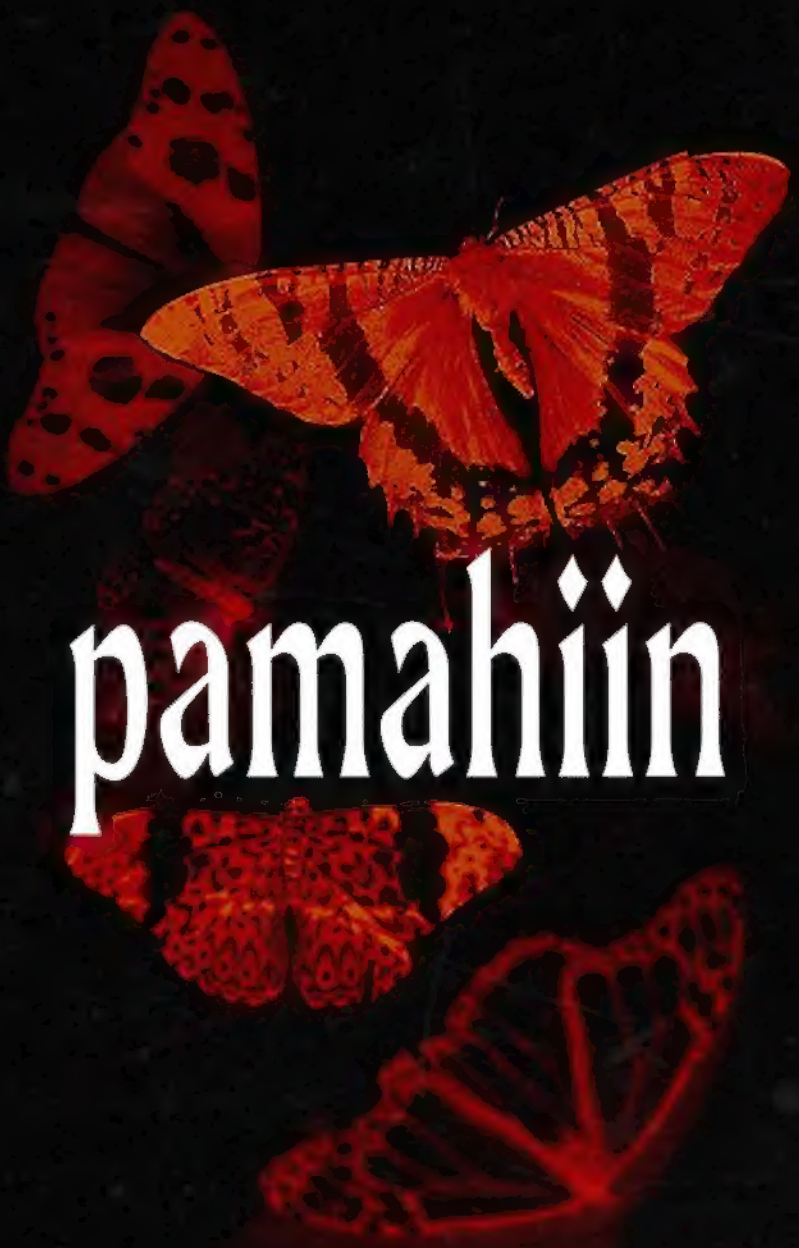
UPLB Writers' Club



pamahiin

Literary Folio

PAMAHIIN
UPLB Writers' Club Literary Folio 2021

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MGA NILALAMAN

2 ***Storya ng Kaluluwang Umiiyak sa Ulan ng Todos Los Santos***

IRNST JASON ASPERGA

4 ***Wake***

SETH CASTRODES

8 ***Pares***

MARGARETTE ANNE MEDIANO

10 ***The last time I saw Patti***

JED TAMBOON

15 ***Campus Tour***

MARY JOYCE BERNAL

16 ***The Butterfly Lane***

ELAINE DE GUZMAN

20 ***Tahanang Bitak***

ARA MENDOZA

21 ***Hain***

CHRYSTEL DARBIN

28 ***Ang Manananggal sa Tondo noong Mayo 1992***

JASON RENZ BARRIOS

30 ***these hands that take***

BELLE MEJICO

36 ***Dalisay***

TRICIA SANDOVAL

38 ***Fingers Crossed***

FAITH MORALES

42 ***Holding Out for Sirens***

FELISE CALZA

44 ***untapped magic and childlike faith***

BIANCA CUSTODIO

47 ***Ghosts***

JECKO SANJORJO

PANIMULA

Sa mundong binubuo ng paniniwala at hindi paniniwala, napakaraming tanong ang maaaring umusbong.

Gaano nga ba kamalas ang pusang itim? Bakit nga ba may pagkain sa ibabaw ng lapida? Anong mensahe ang dala ng mga paru-paro? At ano nga ba ang hiling na bitbit ng mga kubyertos?

Sa mga hinaharap nating pagsubok sa araw-araw, maaaring may mga pagkakataon na sinusuri natin ang mga pamahiin na naipasa sa bawat henerasyon. Maaaring itong pagtatanong ay simbolo ng paglaya at pagbabago—isang pagbasag sa mga paniniwala na nagsisilbing hadlang o maaari ring manipesto ng mga limot na hiling at pag-asa. At sa panahong tayo ay hiwa-hiwalay, marahil ay sa mga tanong natin mahahanap ang pagkakabuklod-buklod.

Kaya sa pag-usbong ng mga tanong, kasabay din ang paglabas ng mga salita, ng mga emosyon, ng mga storya, at ng mga manunulat.

Samahan ang UPLB Writers' Club sa pagbabakas nila ng mga tanong, pag-asa, paghiling, at pagbagsag ng mga nakasanayan at naturo.

Ito ang "Pamahiin"

PAMAHIIN

Storya ng Kaluluwang Umiiyak sa Ulan ng Todos Los Santos

IRNST JASON ASPERGA

Dati'y may nagnakaw sa lamay,
Ayun, pulitiko na't may buhay.
Nagka-asawa't tatlong anak,
Mabisyo sa sugal at inuming alak.

Noong ang pulitiko ay namatay,
Mga manok bawal daw idamay.
Sa lamay, bagamat kurakot, 'di matino,
May paruparo, kaya papalangit daw ito.

May pagsiga sa harap ng bahay.
Mga hikain, malapit nang sa kanya sumabay.
May pagsaboy ng asin sa bubungan
Kaya nabutas, nagkatulo nung umulan.

Sa isang sulok may tulog nang baluktot
Dahil humarap sa pinto'y takot.
Kinabukasan nang gumising at yumukod,
Aba'y napakasakit na ng likod at tuhod.

Anak niyang bulilit na pawis at madungis,
Nagpumilit na maligo't magbihis.
Sa ikatlong araw pa, sumbat ng ina,
Ayun, mabaho't walang kalaro ang bata.

Noong mapagtsismisan ang pagkamatay
Ng pulitiko sa magkapitbahay.
Sabi raw, isang umaga'y may paniking ligaw
Pagpasok sa bahay, senyales daw.

May nagsabing asawa niya'y palakanta
Kapag nagluluto sa kalan nila.
Sambit naman ng isa'y hindi rin daw mainda,
Noo'y tunog ng kwago nila kapag ala-una.

May mga bilin ang ibang matatanda,
Mga salita, pamahiin ata.
Mansiyo'y naging maalikabok na bahay,
Dahil bawal magwalis kung may patay.

Damit ng asawa'y itim daw dapat buong taon.
Sa init, napakahirap naman noon.
Kung hindi bata ay 'wag magpula.
Nalito ang binata kung ano isusuot niya.

Nang kabaong ay ipapalabas na,
Sigaw ng ina'y, 'wag iuntog sa hamba.
Sa prusisyon ng kabaong niya,
Umikot sa barangay, naubusan ng gasolina.

May mag-asawa rin na nag-away
Dahil bana'y ginising sa pagdaan ng patay.
May batang hinabol at napalo
Dahil 'di humakbang sa hukay ng yumao.

Yaong kapitbahay nga't mapamahiin
Mula sa burol nagdala parin ng pagkain.
Sa damit ay 'di nagpalit hanggang maghapon
Dahil magasto raw sa tubig at sabon.

Kalaunang tsismis ang pulitiko'y may kabit, bata.
Rason ng pagkamatay ay doon raw nakuha.
Sa nakitang paruparo, sabi ng matatanda
Sa langit pa rin daw ang punta nun, ata?

Wake

SETH CASTRODES

Day 2

Celebration

My fingers ache again. It bled when I cut myself helping Papang cook, the red blood spewing out from the gaping wound the knife made. I don't remember it hurting, but I remember the warmth escaping.

I almost drop the stack of the guests' used plates. Picking them up would really make my back hurt worse than it already is. I don't remember ever sitting down. The living room has to be spotless. The tables in the front yard can't clean themselves, and Papang is busy enough dealing with the visitors. Some went and played cards in the front. Some helped themselves with the pancit bihon and suman we served. Some talked among themselves, while holding cups of coffee or soft drinks. They must be family, or neighbors, or friends, but I can't see them. And their faces, if they have them. Their voices blend, too, as if they're nothing but a cacophony of noise and mingling. All of it must be a mess.

Some get too close and they get too loud and I have to act nice and I wanted to slam the door to their faces.

But, I can't.

I can't make a mess myself.

For her.

Day 6

Silent Eulogy

The green leaves and multi-colored flowers are splayed around her.

I used to know her so well. Everything about her was translucent but vibrant. You could just know what she thought and felt. After some time, she grew taller, and she grew her hair longer, and her voice grew out of its softness. She used to be the same, and then she was always never the same again. But that's fine. I guess that's how growing up works.

Amidst all she has become, some parts of her persisted. Her voice, and the words carrying them, was a constant melody, always immense and witty and made everyone's lips curl up. Her hands, a reassuring touch, always find themselves grasp those who she knows are in pain. Her eyes, a teeming forest, are always open and gleaming.

She is not the body in that casket.

Day 7

Journey

The car nears an empty intersection. It does not slow down.

"We need to stop for gas."

The woman hums in agreement, her fingers lightly tapping the steering wheel.

"The resemblance is unmistakable, isn't it?"

The light is red.

"They were always beautiful."

The night is black.

"She was gonna come home for summer break, wasn't she?"

The woman turns on the headlights.

"Was she going to be a nurse?"

The green and yellow dots glow, but the red shines the brightest.

"No. A doctor. Her little sister wanted to be a vet. I remember talking to the eldest, and she said that they found the university they could both apply in. Their dad was so excited that they could be together even when they're far from here."

The man hums.

"That's unfortunate."

The light is still red.

The night is still black.

The car passes the empty intersection. It does not speed up.

Day 8

Halfway Down

The air stung my lungs. The heavy quietness made my ears ring, except for the passing of cars. All of it is behind me now. The slight breeze almost carries my hair with it, and I feel, for a moment, a familiar grasp.

The road twisted ahead. Despite the yellow glow of the streetlights, it gleamed black. When I look up, I saw no stars, but tiny droplets falling. Despite the cold, I felt each kiss on my face and on my arms.

Our walk home was bathed in yellow light.

Her voice used to make the air warm.

Her hands used to find themselves gliding through my hair.

Her eyes shone all the time. Even when she was looking at me.

If she wants to, she can follow me.

If she wants to, she can make my bed warm.

If she wants to, she can sleep before me.

Her voice.

Her hands.

Her eyes.

Day 0

Home

"Who's going to be there when I arrive?"

There was silence on the other end. It was heavy, and I hated it.

"You can have my place, and I can go back and take care of Lola. You already exhausted yourself taking care of both of them."

"Are you still going to be a doctor?"

There was that silence again. Longer and heavier.

"Of course, I am. It was what I always wanted."

It was my turn to say something, anything.

"So I'm going to be all by myself?"

The fish was being fried in the kitchen. So loud that it reached the backyard.

"You'll have to wait for me for a year, too. That makes us even, right?"

I gave her no answer. Her laughter felt empty.

"But you've been so excited about it. You always talked about everything that's happened there with me, and how you couldn't wait until I was there."

"It's not like that. It's just..."

The frying subsided. The fish might be golden-brown now.

"It's easier talking about the good things."

"You haven't told me everything?"

"I can't. Maybe, once I'm there, I will."

The door opened behind me, letting out Papang's voice, "Nak, please set the table! We're having dinner."

"Have you talked to them about taking a break?"

"I'm sure they'll understand, right? It's just going to be a year, anyway. I'm sure you can handle everything here by yourself. We both know you're the smart and responsible one. I was a mess from the start. I didn't know why I could do this."

"I don't care."

There was a long pause. I wanted to take back what I said, but it felt good to say it.

"Please talk to me once I'm back, okay?"

Pares

MARGARETTE ANNE MEDIANO

Nanlamig na ang isang tasa ng kape sa lamesa.

Nakasanayan niyang magtimpla para sa dalawa,
at manood ng mainit na balita sa umaga
kasabay ng kasing init din na pandesal.

Kapag magsisimba siya,
wala nang kamay na lalapatan ang kanya;
walang aalalayan sa bewang palabas ng simbahan,
tulad noong unang araw nilang mangako sa altar na sila ay iisa.

Sa tanghali,
hindi inaasahang makapagpapaiyak ang sinigang
tulad ng sibuyas.
Kahit gaano karaming sampalok ang ilagay,
hindi mapapalitan ang orihinal na kilig na yumayakap sa kanyang puso.

Pagdating ng siyesta'y walang mahimbing na natutulog sa kutson
o di kaya'y
lalabas sa banyo, bagong ligo,
suot ang kahel na daster
na binili niya pa sa palengke noong nakaraang linggo

Kalaunan,
ang tanging kasalo sa meryendang tinapay at mantikilya
ay ang tugtog sa radyo
at kalampag ng bentilador na kinakalawang na.
Nahuhuli niya ang sariling ngumingiti sa upuang tapat ng kanya,
itutulak nang bahagya ang plato
at tila nag-aalok sa hangin ng paboritong minandal.

Pagdating ng gabi,
payak ang hapunang nakahain sa hapag.

Aksidente siyang naghanda para sa dalawa,
dalawang plato, dalawang baso,
dalawang pares ng kubyertos,
at taimtim niyang tiningnan ang mga kutsara.

Sinandya niyang ihulog ang isa...

Sa pag-iisip na darating siya—
uupo sa harap niya at pagsasaluhan ang ulam at kanin.

Kalaunan ay inihulog niya na rin ang ikalawa...

Lumakas lalo ang pintig ng kanyang dibdib
at ang mga salitang nagpupumilit na kumawala sa kanyang lalamunan,
"bumalik ka",
"parang awa mo na,
bumalik ka."

Nais kong may paglapatan muli ang aking mga kamay,
may makasalo sa mainit na pagkaing nakahain sa hapag,
at may makatabi sa kamang ilang taon nang sumasaklob sa atin.

At sa huli,
malakas ang dagundong ng pagbagsak ng lahat ng kutsara sa bahay.

The last time I saw Patti

JED TAMBOON

I call her Patti. And I've not forgotten her. I think the opposite was true. I don't know if she remembered me at all-- if she were alive. I have no idea if she would remember that October afternoon. But I do remember, vividly, the last time I saw Patti. I remember the overcast sky, the chilly wind that accompanied it, the noise of the cicadas, the semi-wet pavement, the inviting presence of the main library, and, just beside it, the uninviting bridge that led to the upper campus.

Of course, I can also remember her walking with me. She and her beige dress, skinny frame, the architecture of her shoulders, the fragrance of her perfume. *'You smell like Jasmine flowers, you know that,'* I'd tell her. To which then she'd reply, *'Um, yeah, what about it? You like it huh?'* And I told her she smelled like the Virgin Mary on our altar back home. *'Fuck you,'* she replied, then threw a playful punch on my shoulder.

A heavy rain caught us stranded in our classrooms earlier. She and I made the mistake of not bringing umbrellas. It was really sunny that morning but we should've known better that the campus has its own weather system. Blame it on its location. Situated between Laguna Lake and Makiling, it was bound to happen. Or blame the gods that lived there, I don't know. I never believed in such things. But with the mystic air of the campus on the foot of the mountains conjure. I feel it sometimes. One night during the occasional rotational brownouts, as I was walking back to my dorm I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder as if accompanying me. On another night, a heavy fog entered my room and the smell of frangipani diffused around everywhere. And, listen, the closest frangipani tree was by the Student Union building, which was 10 minutes away from my dorm. I sometimes suspend my skepticism. Look what this campus has done to me, for chrissakes.

When the rain stopped, we decided it's best if we walk together back to our dorms near the College of Forestry. But now as we reached the main library, it began to drizzle again. I told her that we should seek shelter inside the library in the meantime to pass time.

We came seated at the main reading hall after the guards checked our IDs. The reading hall was big, about the size of three basketball courts combined, I thought. We sat opposite each other near the computers where students can search for indexes. I laid my bag on the table and she placed hers at the vacant seat to her left.

This weather. I hate it. You never get used to it, you know. After spending so much time here, I haven't gotten used to it. One morning it's sunny; an hour passes and you get drenched in rain. And those umbrella stealers. I mean, what the fuck,' she started telling me, obviously annoyed.

Don't get saintly on me, Patti. You haven't stolen an umbrella before? I told her.

No. I haven't. Have you? I'm not gonna be surprised if you have.

Well. I may have stolen an umbrella before

You're not sure?

No one's ever sure about things, Patti.

Well, she thought for a moment. *You're right,* she told me.

She looked around the reading hall like she was looking for someone. There were several students across our table minding their own business. A couple of students in a high school uniform were walking across the bookshelves, looking for something. Two students, a couple perhaps, had entered the reading hall and sat on the couches. It has been what-- two years-- since we've been friends. She'd always been one of the lonely types if you get what I mean. Patti never really had any friends other than me. I knew because she told me. Some days we would hang around inside the library, reading a book. Only occasionally she would agree to have a drink with me. But on most days Patti would shelter herself in her dorm.

Of course, I'd ask her about it. She'd say that she doesn't just want to spend money. She said she's alright there and she'd only be tempted to buy something when she gets out. Patti also almost spent the day sleeping just to forget about hunger, she told me.

Ever since her dad died, Patti has been spending more time inside her dormitory. I wanted to console her but she never talked about it. But, from what I heard, her dad was shot dead at night after participating in a picket at a textile factory. I never knew any more than that.

You okay, Patti? I asked her. I knew it had nothing to do with the umbrella or how we are stuck in this library on an awfully rainy night. She's been acting up this week. I knew it. She wasn't participating in lectures as much as she did in the past. She'd get fiery discussions with the professor about the economy and, her words: "this neoliberal bullshit you're teaching!"

I'm-- maybe you're right. Maybe no one's ever sure of things. No one, I tell you-- and nothing in this *makes sense. I've been thinking about it. About moving back to the province. I'm not so sure about it. But it was mama. You know her. You know how persistent she might be.*

Didn't you tell her? I'm sure she would understand. Tita *has always been understanding. Like you said. I know her. She would understand if you'd like to finish first.*

Let me tell you something, K. I haven't told anyone about this. But I'm telling you because that's the least I could do.

I waited for her to continue.

It's not like I wanted to stay. Nor do I want to leave. It's just... I don't know. Ever since I've settled here. My life has been so messy. A few therapy sessions here and there, in between classes. It didn't help. There's something pushing inside me. Some entity is trying to make my life miserable. Some kind of mist is hanging around me. I learned to ignore it; sometimes it gets all too sunny and calm but then it starts the mist evaporates and starts raining hard. And puddles appear, discouraging me to move forward. And bullfrogs mock me as I try to struggle opening my umbrella or look for the nearest roof to shelter in.

I reached across the table to hold her hands. It was shaking and I gripped tightly to let her know that I'm listening.

Sometimes when I'm with you I forget about it. And the rain stops, and cicadas chirp, and birds wind up the clock of the world as if urging it to continue. But all of it is temporary, K. Do you hear me? Am I making sense?

I told her I understand. Although... Can I be more honest with you? I didn't. I didn't understand at that time. All I know is that Patti was struggling and I had to be there with her. I have to try and understand even if I don't. And even if I don't, I try to assure her that I'm there.

The professor sat opposite the boy. He was a sickly man with a balding head, thin glass frames, and a thick stubble on his chin. The anthropology professor was doing his doctoral dissertation on magic, the occult, and religious and mythical cosmologies in Makiling when he heard about this case. There was a long pause. He waited for the boy to continue the story when started to tear down.

"You okay?" he asked. He grabbed a tissue to his left and handed it down to the boy. "If you don't want to say anything more just tell me. You've been of huge help already so don't worry about it."

"It's alright," the boy said. He took the tissue and wiped his cheeks. "Thank you. Now, where am I?"

He reminded the boy.

"We stayed inside the library until closing time. It didn't stop raining outside. The drizzle earlier continued to be light rain. We eventually left the library because they were making us leave already. We ran across the field to shelter beneath the jeepney stop. It was night near curfew hours and jeepneys that passed through were also on the way home. Occasional jeepneys that pass by were full and some do not go as far as the upper campus.

"I told her that we should just ride one and stay at the coffee shops outside the campus to continue our talk. But she was insistent on going back. Anyway, I had to stay awake, too, and finish some papers due that week. So I thought it was best to stay awhile and be productive. She told me she was just gonna run against the rain back to her dorm. And I told her I'd come with her. But she said I gotta do the things I needed to do and I should not worry about her. She was, after all, not a child. And she hated men helping her, she always tells me. I have no choice but to give in. Although I really wanted to see her off."

"So you went opposite ways?" the professor asked.

"Yes. And that was the last time I ever saw her. She didn't show up the next day. I thought maybe she needed to rest. Then she also didn't show up the following weeks. I thought that she was maybe sick from the rain. I tried calling her everywhere but I couldn't reach her. All social media accounts were deleted. *Tita* didn't know where she was either. And you know what happened right? They started posting pictures of her around campus. And radios and news programs announced that she went missing. She just vanished. Just like that."

The boy, again, looked down, hiding his tears. The professor got up to fetch a cup of water. He handed it down to the boy. His eyes were red and snot smeared his face.

"Thank you," the boy said with a hiccuping sound.

The professor went to his couch, grabbed the recorder, and turned it off. They both thanked each other for each other's time. He reminded the boy that the conversation would be confidential and needed not to worry about it. The boy nods and smiles.

Before separating, the boy turned to the professor and said something.

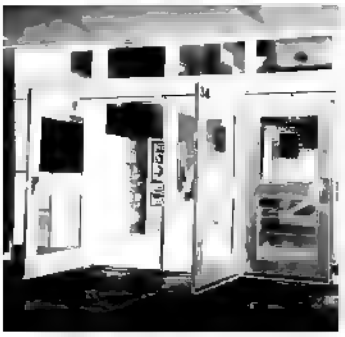
"You know what I just remembered," the boy said in a faint voice. "The last time I saw her she was crossing that bridge that leads to the forestry campus. I waited for her to exit my vision so that, at least, even without me there, she'd feel a little safer-"

The professor looked at him. Outside, he can see by the window the drizzle of rain. It was just beginning to rain. From the looks of it, he could tell that it's going to be heavy rain.

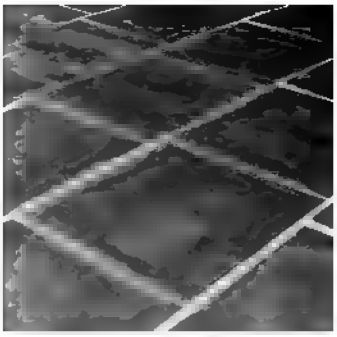
"-and I can tell you, from my perspective, she took forever walking that bridge. Slowly, interminably, but unhesitantly towards the crossroads."

Campus Tour

MARY JOYCE BERNAL



1.
here is where i run
my hands through
the thread keeping
the pendant
in place a saint
surrounded by inscriptions of
a dead language
my grandmother gave for
good luck.



2.
as if by impulse
my eyes find themselves
drawn to the crooked
tiles. the multiplying
molds between the
gaps remain unnoticed.

3.
the barest of profanities
earn me a night in the closet,
my eyes searching the dark,
so why are the ones who carved
the worst of them
in my seat
here in the same room,
stares digging through
my crawling skin, their mouths
saying a name that is not
my name?

4.
my arms have
numbed. sometimes it's
become more difficult to write
a full sentence
than to finish saying
one. just
when i thought all
feeling has left
my skin, the water
courses down, creating
a familiar sting.

5.
i remain three floors above
the queue of laughter
and protesting stomachs,
sitting with my back straight
enough for anyone
to witness the next time
my head connects
with the nook of my chair,
the culprits' tongues tasting
the bread i snatched
from the lonely breakfast table
and mine
tasting iron.

6.
flickering lights
decorate the wide
expanse of white, parts
of it threatening
to collapse. it is the only thing
in this place
that is out of reach, but
sometimes i wonder
about the sensation
of the tips of my fingers
grazing the ceiling,
of my toes
the oxygen that prevents me
from being untouchable.
my breath warms
my palms as i whisper
the prayer i was taught
to tell the saint.

7.
familiar sets of
eyes wait for
an opportunity. my palms
sweat against the hem of
my skirt. cold seeps through
my skin, and i know
it has nothing
to do with the wind that
proves to be harsher
in wide spaces.
rough voices call me
names that are not
my name, and i dread
the day they discover
the one
i answer to.

8.
it starts
the second time
at the intersection. i count
the thick lines on the asphalt,
pass by strangers and
strange homes, stopping far enough
from
my next destination.
i trace my fingers
on the delicate
thread until they find
the charm,
the only thing i call
mine.
it has produced a cycle
of miracles, keeping me
on these unstable feet. and
while i await its next one,

i walk.

The Butterfly Lane

ELAINE DE GUZMAN

As if gravity has lost itself, I fell into nothing. I slowly opened my eyes and found myself in my mother's arms. She put me down and said, "Let us walk," as she held my tiny hand in hers.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"There's a butterfly road uphill. You love butterflies, right?"

The thought of seeing butterflies somehow elicited something in me. I flashed this big smile and started hopping in excitement as she tried to slow me down, worried I might fall.

A butterfly passed by us. "**Do you know that butterflies carry the souls of the dead,**" you asked.

I have heard you say this before so I knew, but I responded just how I did when I was a child. "**Then why don't they walk?**" And right then, I saw you smile again after a long time.

The road that we were taking was the most beautiful road I have ever seen in my life. You called it the *"butterfly lane"*. If there was autumn here, it would be like this. A touch of nostalgia could be felt from the different flowers on each side of the road- with some trees shedding their earthly leaves. There were thousands of butterflies around, some as if following us. I didn't know where they were coming from.

We were going uphill when we saw a box. There, we found our old dog whom we lost when I was 8. "**It's Lucky!**" I exclaimed. How did he end up here? I searched my memories and it brought me to that morning when you told me that Lucky is gone. I asked where he went, and you said he went to heaven. I didn't understand what heaven was but I learned right then what loss felt like.

Beside the box was a backpack. There, we found some of my old stuff. The things I used to own when I was young but I now have forgotten about. There was the old eraser I used from first to sixth grade in primary school because you did not want to buy me a new one. You told me erasers are meant to last long. I hated how mine lasted so long so I hid it in my cabinet and told you I lost it. That same day, you bought me a new one even when you knew I would not be able to use it much anyway because we would start using pens in high school. Perhaps you were just trying to teach me how to cherish things.

We also found my test paper from 10th grade, my first failing exam. The one I hid in my backpack for days so that you would not find out I failed. In the end, you found it and just laughed about what I did. You told me it was alright to fail and make mistakes. You taught me that my life is much more than the score on my exam.

The trees have grown taller in size. The rain started falling. Someone was walking towards us not a butterfly. A pair of hands gave me a red bracelet. It was the one father gave me as I was moving out of our home for college— a lucky charm, you told me. I never really believed in lucky charms, but you did.

"**I think there aren't any more left,**" you said. Suddenly, the road became narrow. We were close already. My strides became larger as I grew in height so I started slowing down to your pace. I held onto your hand as we got closer to the big tree ahead, where the butterflies were flying around. There were countless of them, and their different colors made them look magical. I couldn't help but be taken aback by this ethereal scene. I also couldn't help myself from wanting to touch them so I did, but thousands of them fluttered. Different colors flew in every direction.

I let go of your hand in surprise but just then, you started fading away. I tried to hold onto you but in a blink of an eye, you were gone you have already flown with them. I called for you but no words came out. My hands searched among the thousands of butterflies flying around. As I swept my palms in the air, I caught one. I held onto it, fell to my knees, and let my tears fall. Suddenly, a hand was forcing me to let go. "**It will die,**" the voice said.

It's already dead, I replied.

I woke up and felt like my chest was about to explode. I broke down in tears. ***It has been so long since I have seen your face, Ma. It has been so long since you were gone.*** *My screams echoed on the four walls around me. As if pent-up grief has found its way out from my heart. It has taken all over my chest, racing out of its way to becoming my wails and my tears. My cries became softer as I tried to flash your face multiple times in my head so I would not forget. The feeling of your being and your presence. In these moments of loss and confusion, I found a butterfly in my very own room.*

Tahanang Bitak

ARA MENDOZA

Dito sa amin,
iniingatan
na huwag basagin
ang katahimikan.

Sa hapag,
walang kalansing na maririnig
marahan ang mga pag-nguya.
Aakalaing mapayapa.

Ang sabi ni nanay,
huwag puro reklamo
susi raw sa buhay ang makuntento.
Hindi naman ikamamatay
ang paghawak sa baso
ng kapeng walang tangkay.
Hangga't walang sabaw na tumatagas
mula sa mangkok na may tapyas,
matutong pagtiyagaan
ang mga sirang gamit
lalo na kung walang pamalit.

Ang bilin naman ni tatay,
masama raw sa dalaga
ang paggamit ng sirang bagay.
Kaya't kung mapunta man sa kaniya
ang platong wala pang lamat,
tahimik niyang itong ipinapagpalit.

Ang buhay raw kasi ay puno
ng pagtitiis.
Kaya't sinanay kami sa pagkimkim,
sa palitan ng buntong hininga
at tikhim.

Nakadungaw sa bintana
ang nagbabadyang gulo.
Nagpupumilit makapasok
sa siwang ang pagtatalo.
Ngunit hindi hahayaan pang lumawak
ang lahat ng mga bagay dito
na may bitak.

Kaya di bale nang makahulog
ng mga pira-pirasong parte
ng aking kabuuan
sa mga binabaybay kong daan.
Basta makauwi
nang hindi pa tuluyang humihiwalay
ang kaluluwa sa kalamnan.
Dahil walang konsepto ng pagkaubos
sa pamilyang sa una pa lang
ay pinagkaitan.

Buti na lang,
bago pa ako makulong dito
nasilayan ko na ang mundo.
Lumuwas ako
mula sa tambakan,
lasug-lasog,
naghanap ng nais kumupkop.

Hindi pala lugar
ang totoong tahanan.
Siya ang tanging nagpapaalala
kapag nakakalimutan kong
magpakawala
ng hininga.
At nagparamdam na may pag-asa
sa labas ng pagtitiis.
Ngunit kailangan ko pa rin
bumalik.

Isang gabi,
sa malayo pa lamang
dinig ko na ang pagkawasak
ng buong bahay.
Nagbabatuhan ng sumbat,
binasag ng sigawan ang lahat.
Walang maisasalba,
walang natira kahit isa.

Tuluyang napilay
ang haligi ng bahay,
bumalik na sa una niyang pamilya
si tatay.

Malas.
Walang iyak na lumalabas.
Lahat na lang dito sa bahay,
isang pitik lamang
mula sa pagkawasak.

Sabi pa ni nanay,
magkakaiba tayo ng kahihinatnan,
huwag daw akong matakot
masaktan.
Ang sabi ko naman,
"tiyak
walang may gustong umapak
sa bubog, Nay."

Kaya nang biglain niya ako
sa kaniyang pagbisita,
durog at may pangamba,
natapos na ang pagpapanggap.
Ngunit ang sabi niya,
ang tunay raw na umiibig
ay buong loob na tumatanggap.

Habang hawak
ang mga pirasong nahulog ko
sa daan,
nakita siya ni nanay
sa labas ng bahay.
Ang sabi'y
"Halika iho, pasok. Ipaghahain kita."

Hain

CHRYSTEL DARBIN

Dalawang sachet ng kape at dalawang pakete ng biskwit; iyan lamang ang baon ng mag-ama habang binabaybay ang kahabaan ng kalsada sa ilalim ng tirik na araw. Kakaiba ang init na sumisingaw mula sa lupa ngunit hindi na rin ito iniinda ng mga paa ni Ernie. Abala ito sa pagpapatahan ng anim na taong gulang na anak na si Nick habang patuloy pa rin ang pag-iyak ng musmos. Maaring ito ay dahil sa init, sa ngalay, o sa gutom.

Tumigil ang mag-ama nang panandalian sa paglalakad at kinapa ni Ernie ang dalawang bulsa ng kanyang gula-gulanit at maputik na pantalon. Inilabas nito ang dalawang pakete ng biskwit, tinitigan nang pansamantala ang pagkain sa palad, at muling ibinalik ang isang pakete sa bulsa. Ang natira naman sa kanyang mga kamay ay ang pananghalian nila. Pinagsaluhan ng mag-ama habang nagtatawanan ang apat na piraso ng biskwit. Mukhang walang pinagkaiba ang araw na ito mula sa bawat araw ng nagdaan na buwan titingin si Ernie sa malayo at magsisimulang humakbang papalayo sa arko. Ngunit ilang hakbang lamang ay muli itong tatalikod at babalik sa isang pamilyar na lugar.

Hindi na nila puwedeng iwan ang swerte sa lugar na ito. Itaas na ang nagsabi.

Ito na ang hudyat.

Sa pagsapit ng alas kwatro ay magsisimula na ang sunod-sunod na pagdami ng mga tao na bumabaybay rin sa kahabaan ng kalsada. Magsisimula nang sumilong at umorder ang mga drayber ng motor sa karinderya ni Aling Cely kasama ang hapong-hapo nilang mga katawan at ang malulutong nilang mga mura. Lalabas din ang mga nagchichismisan at ang mga pawisang musmos na naglalaro ng habul-habulan. Titingnan lamang sila ng mag-ama at hihilingin ng batang si Nick na sumali sa mga naglalaro, ngunit alam nito, kahit sa murang edad pa lamang, na may laro ito na mas dapat unahin. Aalisin ni Nick ang tingin sa mga naglalaro at muling babalik ang mag-ama sa isang masikip at masangsang na lugar.

Iisa-isahin muli nila ang mga nakahilerang kumpulan ng basura kung saan puro dahon at bulaklak ang unang bubungad sa kanila. Hindi na rin ito masama, iniipon ng mag-ama ang mga sariwa pang bulaklak upang pangtaboy ng masangsang na amoy ng kalsada sa gabi bago sila matulog. Kung sswertehin ay may makikita rin silang kandila at

posporo na pupwedeng magbigay ng konting init tuwing malamig ang gabi. Biglang mapapapatigil si Ernie sa paghahalungkat at bahagyang ibabaybay ang kanyang mga mata sa tahimik na paligid na tila ba ay may natutunugan. Ngunit sa hindi rin kalaunan ay muling babalik ang okupado nitong mga mata at kamay sa iba't ibang tambakan at bakanteng lote. Aabutin ng siyam-siyam ang mag-ama habang palipat-lipat sa iba't ibang kalsada sa paghahanap ng makakain. Kung mamalasin at walang makita, hindi pa rin naman tapos ang kanilang gabi.

Pagdating ng alas-sais, makikita si Ernie na nakahakbay sa kanyang anak. Kakanta ang dalawa ng isang pamilyar na awitin mula sa simbahan. Habang naglalakad ay kakapain ni Ernie ang bulsa ng kanyang gula-gulanit na pantalon at muling may ilalabas na dalawang sachet ng kape at dalawang pakete ng biskwit. Hindi tulad kanina, uubusin ng mag-ama ang mga pagkain sa kanilang mga kamay sa iilan lamang na segundo habang nagtatawanan. Ngunit sa hindi katagalan ay mararamdaman nila ang mga matang nakatingin, mga matang nakamasid sa kanilang bawat galaw. Darating ang mga nakauniporme, hawak ang kanilang mga baton, at muling mapipilitan na magtago ang mag-ama.

Sa pagsapit ng alas-siyete, sa pagsisimula ng balita sa telebisyon ng mga naninirahan at sa isa na namang gabi ng mga humahagulgol o nagsisigawan, ay muling babalik ang mag-ama sa puno ng Acacia kung saan nila pinapalipas ang bawat gabi nitong nakaraan. Sa kasamaang palad, mamamataan nanaman ni Ernie ang mga nakauniporme na nagmamasid malapit sa ilalim ng puno. Mukhang kakailanganin nilang maghanap ng bagong masisilungan.

Ito na ang huli nilang pagkakataon.
Ito na rin ang huling hudyat.

Sa pagpatak ng alas-nuwebe, magsisimula nang tumahimik ang kalye. Iaangat ni Ernie ang mga mata sa kalangitan at tititigan ang mga bituin. Pagkatapos ng ilang minuto ay ililipat nito ang atensyon sa mga ilaw sa daan. Susunod ang anak nito na si Nick. Ilalabas nito ang isang pakete ng biskwit at sabay silang maglalakad paalis sa kalsada at pabalik sa puno ng Acacia sa pagbabakasakaling pwede na ulit nilang palipasin ang gabi nang tahimik sa ilalim nito. Hindi pa rin sila pwedeng umalis sa lugar, hindi sila sigurado sa ihahain sa kanila ng kahabaan pa ng kalsada. Sapat na ang mumuting naibibigay sa kanila ng lugar na ito.

Bago pa man sila makarating sa liblib na lugar kung nasaan ang puno, may matatanaw si Ernie na liwanag sa hindi kalayuan. Hindi katulad noong sa iba, pula at dilaw ang kulay ng liwanag na nagmumula rito. Ito ang marka ng swerte para sa mag-ama. Bibilinan nito ang anak na hintayin na lamang siya sa ilalim ng puno, at siya nama'y dahan-dahang dederetso sa direksyon kung nasaan ang liwanag.

Bago nito marating ang dulo ng kalsada ay may pamilyar na mahahagip ang mga mata nito. Mukhang sineswerte siya sa gabing iyon. Liliko siya sa kanyang gawing kanan habang nagmamasid sa kanyang paligid. Muli, nakabukas lang ang pintuan sa mumunting lugar kung saan pansamantalang nakahimlay ang yumao. Dahan-dahan na lalapit si Ernie sa mga nakahanda sa lamesa habang buong ingat pa rin na nagmamasid. Makikita na sa mga kamay nito ang dadalawang tinapay. Mapagtatanto nito na hindi iyon sapat kaya't muli itong babalik sa lamesa upang kumuha ng mas marami. Tulad ng ibang araw ay hindi na nito aabalaing tingnan ang yumao at wala na itong oras para magpasalamat. Kakaripas na ito ng takbo papalayo.

Di tulad ng sa iba na puro kape at biskwit, ngayon ay puno ang kamay ni Ernie ng iba't ibang klase ng tinapay.

Ngunit hindi pa tapos ang gabi para kay Ernie. Desidido itong maghanap pa ng pupuwedeng pampawi ng kalam ng sikmura. Siguradong gutom pa ang anak na naghihintay sa malamig na lapag. Maririnig ang paghahabol ni Ernie ng kanyang hininga kasabay ang pagbagal ng kanyang mga yapak. Mapapatigil sa paglalakad si Ernie. Lilingon ito sa paligid, tila ba may hinahanap. Palalim na nang palalim ang gabi, padilim nang padilim, patahimik nang patahimik. Tutuloy sa paglalakad si Ernie, at habang siya'y papalapit ay papalaki nang papalaki ang liwanag.

Ang liwanag ay galing sa mga nakasinding kandila.

Totoo na iba ang swerte na dala ng lugar na ito sa mag-ama.

Mamamangha si Ernie sa dami ng pagkain na makikita niya sa lapag. Pansamantala itong lilingon sa kanyang paligid at nang mawari na siya lamang ang tanging tao sa lugar, agad-agad niyang pupunuin ang kanyang damit at kamay ng mga pagkaing maari pa nilang pagsaluhan ng anak. Magbibigay ito ng maikling dasal bago tititigan ang larawan sa kanyang harapan. Natatakpan ito ng mga nanunuyong bulaklak at mga itim na laso. Hahawiin niya ang mga ito at babasahin ang nakasulat;

"**Hustisya para sa lahat ng biktima ng paglabag ng karapatang pantao** "

Mukhang iyon ang unang beses na nakapagbigay siya ng pasasalamat sa yumao. Iyon na rin ang huli. Huli na bago siya nakaramdam ng kakaibang takot mula sa mga matang nakatingin. Sa pinakahuling pagkakataon ay lumingon si Ernie sa kanyang likuran. Lumaki ang kanyang mata at bago pa makapagbigkas ng anumang salita ay naunahan na ito ng putok ng baril.

Swerte. May maihahain nanaman sa mesa.

Nakabukas pa ang mga mata ni Ernie at mahigpit pa ang pagyakap ng mga kamay nito sa iilang piraso ng tinapay at biskwit ngunit ang dugo nito ay dahan-dahan nang sinisipsip ng lupa.

Hawiin ang nagkalat na pagkain gamit ang baton.
Palitan ang biskwit sa bulsa.
Takpan ang mukha ng karton.

Ito ang simula ng maha-habang ko pang ritwal.
Mahirap at kailangang mag-ingat sa una.
Dapat sigurado.
Mas madali na ito sa susunod.

Ang Manananggal sa Tondo noong Mayo 1992

JASON RENZ BARRIOS

Ilang araw bago ang eleksyon, uusbong ang misteryo.
Ayon sa mga sabi-sabi may namataang manananggal
Nagmula raw probinsya, napadpad ng Maynila
katulad ng karamihan na doon piniling manirahan
sa gitna ng ingay at kawalang kasiguraduhan

May magsisiga ng makabuhay.
Bago sumapit ang alas sais,
hindi na palalabasin ang mga munting paslit.
Maging ang mga buntis, maagang patutulugin.
Sa pagkagat ng dilim, ipagdadasal na makahimbing.

Sa mabilis na pagkalat ng mga haka-haka,
pagbabalingan ng hinala
ang isang babaeng ngalan ay Teresita.
Ito'y matapos mamataan ang paglipad ng halimaw
sa kaniyang bubungan sa nakalipas na mga araw

Mauuna siyang gisahin
bago ang nagkaubusang bawang sa palengke ng Pritil
na ginawang pamahid sa pader
at palamuti sa bintana ng bawat kabahayan
na ang mga pintuan ay minarkahan ng krus na pula.

Sa susunod na mga araw, ipapakita ng kaawa-awang ale
ang paang naputulan ng tatlong daliri
bilang natatanging ebidensiya laban sa mga akusasyon
sabay ihahayag sa madla na siya mismo, katulad nila
ay isa lamang biktima ng kinakatakutang nilalang.

Silang mga kumakandidato
ay maaagawan ng espasyo
sa harapan ng mga pahayagan,
matapos pagpiyestahan ng midya
ang kwento ng manananggal sa Tondo.

Kalaunan, matatabunan ang misteryo
dahil sa mga mananangggal
ng buhay at karapatang pantao

Sa pagsapit ng eleksyon,
Matatalo ang dating unang asawa,
Uupo ang tumiwalag na kaalyado ni Apo.

Ilang araw lang ang bibilangin,
babalik rin sa dating gawi
ang masalimuot na buhay sa distrito
Tirik man ang araw, malalim man ang gabi
walang kasiguraduhan, walang pagbabago.

these hands that take

BELLE MEJICO

On the last night of the thief's risky life, his hands burned red from the insatiable itch.

No matter how much his bitten fingernails clawed at his palms, the young man called Samuel or was it Severino? Sergei? Sebastian? It hardly matters now anyway... not in my old age, Manang Consuelo brushed off whenever she tried to remember. The man whose name surely started with an S's face constricted with obvious irritation. The warm yellow light was too bright, a match for the humidity from the poorly ventilated space. Nonetheless, it casted the young man in a softer countenance; like he was a goody-two shoes who could do no wrong.

It was this apparent quirk, however, that led him astray. The picture ingrained in her mind's eye was the constant nagging of their mother during Consuelo's youth: frown lines from brows constantly furrowed and the familiar *talakera's* cadence as seven year old S's head was bent down in shame, a pair of palms outstretched as their mother's veiny hands dabbed a cotton ball doused in Betadine on his acquired scratches. All self inflicted. A bad habit her brother carried until his final days.

But at the time, the small transgression earned the amused laughter of their family patriarch who was bent over their low rocking chair; today's paper nestled on his large hands.

"Ha! What a good sign for you! They say itchy hands mean money is forthcoming!"

While their father's enthusiasm was bitterly received by maternal disbelief (via a second round of scolding towards her husband), it was the first of many escalating arguments. Whether it was by their Pa's insistence of his games for thrill or it was their mother's excessively thrifty nature, one thing was certain: money was a planet that orbited frequently around their family, one that eventually became the root of what tore it apart.

Manang Consuelo supposed a lifetime of poverty did that to people of questionable character: the sickly desire to be shrouded in monetary wealth, that is. The death of their father signaled the death of their financial stability as well. Not one with a head for academics, S focused his attention on things he was good at: his street smarts

that made him an ally amongst the ambitious delinquents in the dilapidated streets; not to mention his obsession with beating the odds (figuratively, in *sabongs* and any venture worth an impulsive gamble). In his road to no redemption, one thing about him remained the same: his prickly palms neither salve nor rubbing alcohol could truly soothe.

Perhaps in a way, it was better off their Ma went off to a better place. She might have died instead of heartbreak if she lived through knowing S truly grew to become their father's son.

"Manang? Manang?" An unfamiliar voice called out to her. Then a gentle shake on her frail shoulders. Unbeknownst to her, a young nurse hovered over her sloping form; her nerves becoming frantic. Though it's not like she could blame her. Even the nurse herself decided to retreat to the van's open door just to feel the cool breeze of the recently cleaned air conditioner.

It didn't occur to Manang Consuelo that she had closed her eyes as she was so entranced with vivid memories. The faint rattling of beads prompted her to snap out of her trance. A beam of bright light greeted her, forcing her to blink for her vision's readjustment. She too, like her old man in her mind's eye, sat but this time over a field of unkempt grass. The old crone tried to move her legs, but they were stiff and immobile. The physical powerlessness made her feel irritable.

"Oh, praise the Lord God! I thought the worst had... Well, anyway, it wouldn't do you good to get sunburn in this heat!" A tall morena's face sagged with relief, her Batangueño accent present in pronunciations despite her clear grasp of English. It was a requirement in the home for the nurses to address Miss Consuelo in the language she was most comfortable in.

Manang Consuelo's brows furrowed, giving her a once over "I see they didn't tell me Betchay wasn't assigned to me anymore..."

"Ay Ma'am! You've forgotten me already!" The nurse pouted partially in jest "Me and Ate Betchay share schedules watching over you since she has a family emergency po... Watching over her sister and all..."

"Not a lot of people are worth remembering anymore." The old woman mumbled.

"What was that po?"

As she leaned closer, Manang Consuelo caught a whiff of floral cologne. At least she smells nicer than she looks, she thought as she observed her crumpled white uniform.

Manang Consuelo raised a thin brow "I said everyone is forgettable eventually."

All sign of that cheerful smile vanished from the doe-eyed nurse's face. Exactly what Manang Consuelo wanted. She had no use for rehearsed optimism in her life.

The young nurse situated herself away from her patient's wheelchair and went towards the grave they faced. Her hands gripped the handles as she lowered her head to see what Manang Consuelo was facing: a thin slab of polished concrete that marked a dead man's grave.

"But not this one, it seems." The young nurse replied cheekily, her chin nearly grazing the old woman's hair. Manang Consuelo finally found where the rattling came from: A makeshift rosary bracelet nestled in the nurse's wrist.

Meanwhile, the nurse squinted her eyes to read the engravings on the tombstone better.

Born on... Jun 1946, Died on July 13, 1973. The nurse couldn't read some of the letters since the moss had caked onto the stone. Strange, the nurse thought.

"It's neither their birthday nor their death anniversary since it's October..." she murmured.

Manang Consuelo could hear her mumbling a name the same one she didn't bother to look at nor ask for anymore then the epitaph that came along with it. An exaggerated gasp followed. A string of colorful profanities nearly left Manang Consuelo's lips.

"*Dios mio*! Do they not teach you any manners in whatever school you come from anymore?!" The old woman chastised, her hand grasping her thumping chest.

"But Ma'am, I know this person!" The young nurse exclaimed, a moniker escaping her mouth. She proceeded to tell her that she was a local in the *eskinita* Manang Consuelo grew up in. On and on the forgettable nurse prattled over her anecdote over the notorious troublemaker of the barangay.

The old woman supposed part of the reason why she remembered S very strongly was because Consuelo had heard variations of this tale: S was linked with one of the most wanted people in the police department for organized theft and racketeering. S was a

womanizer who charmed the rich girls of the West side and stole from their manors after he had his way with them. In some versions, he was the mysterious thief the newspapers couldn't stop writing about...

All the same, the bottomline was whoever S was to the public, he had a knack for stealing things that weren't his, and in the end, he always got his due.

BANG! A loud noise echoed behind the two, prompting the old woman to tuck her head between her hands.

The nurse's provincial twang became more prominent as she marched towards the brusque driver who in turn shouted his apologies, but for Consuelo, the sound became muffled as a high tune rung in her ears.

"Eto naman si kuya, damuho din eh! Naglasing ka na naman kagabi no kaya mamaas maasan ka ngayon... Pareho tayong walang pambayad pag nasira tong minamaneho mo, tangina kaaaa..."

"Makamura naman to oh, harap harapan dun kay Ma'am. Strikto pa naman yun sa pagmumura... Nabara kasi kaya napalakas, sorry na..." The driver replied, trying to brush off the visible crack by the window that wasn't there a while ago.

"Ganire laang naman kasi pagsara, ganire lang oh, ganire!"

Their exchange was unheard by the patient who still had her head tucked over her arms. Her heart throbbed, mistaking the noise for one she hadn't heard since the night S left her alone for good. She was in that bright, humid room again. Back with her Kuya S and his youthful face. If only time had a way for me to remember it for as long as I have left...

"O, eto oh... Matagal ko na dapat inabot to sa'yo."

Calloused hands placed an envelope on her own. A younger Consuelo immediately opened the flap, suspicious of its heaviness. Her heart sank as she found tied stacks of foreign cash tucked neatly into the confines.

"Kuya, ano na naman to! Saang lupalop mo naman to napulot?!" Consuelo exasperated. Her despair only worsened. Was it her fate to be their mother's daughter, too? Were they simply doomed to repeat their patterns?

The only thing that stopped her from lecturing her brother anew was the pale desperation in his face. A desire with good intentions but misaligned methods. But alas, by then, the words left unsaid were too many to say aloud in time.

After rushed farewells and promises of a better explanation, the next time she saw S, he was lifeless in the morgue.

"Sige, subukan mong murahin yang si Ma'am... Baka maalala pa niyang magdemanda dun sa opisina, makita mo—"

"Sorry about that, Ma'am! Nasira pa ata yung bintana nung van... Ma'am... Ma'am... You look like you've seen a ghost... Do you need water or—" The nurse queried frantically, noticing her patient's distress.

Manang Consuelo clicked her tongue "Your nanay.... was a victim of this man, yes?" She unfurled from her position.

A pause "Ay, opo! She told me about him when I mentioned you were one of my patients. Wouldn't stop talking about him—"

"Then you shouldn't be more than sixteen years old." Manang Consuelo declared, immediately recognizing where she knew the young nurse from "What are you doing working in a nursing home when you're not even old enough to be employed?"

"What I have to, Ma'am."

The young nurse's tone was so uncharacteristically serious that she had to look at the girl's face, a tale of horrors hidden in her eyes. Not unlike someone Consuelo once knew...

"Ma and Pa told me stories of him po, when he scammed a large sum from their bank accounts. I think she used the words *'charming', 'gwapo'... tanga*." The nurse bristled as she realized she just insulted this man. Someone who clearly mattered to her.

"Sa eskinita po namin, h-he's something like an urban legend, a warning...."

Manang Consuelo did the last thing the young nurse expected: she laughed. A rich, low rhythm of a laugh, as if the girl told Consuelo the funniest punchline she'd heard in years.

"Oh, you poor naïve girl.... What power do legends have over us if not the power we grant to them?"

The young nurse stood there, mouth agape. As if the old woman didn't have to experience the aftermath of the brawl in a local gambling den that took the last of her blood's life.

"But your mother was right. *Tanga* nga si Kuya. For all his life, what he did was chase an ambitious dream na bumunga galing sa pamahiin. A legend. But then again, could I truly blame him? He wanted the same things I did. Although we went different directions, we both dealt the same hand. In the end, wala naman samin ang nanaig."

A humid breeze swept past them, making everything from grass to the fabric of their garments sway to its direction. The strength of the wind filled the somber silence, leaving the nurse with little to say.

"All I wanted was to see his tomb again. Madalas na naman kasi siyang nagpaparamdam eh. Baka akala na ni Kuya nakakalimutan ko na din siya."

Eh siya lang naman natitira kong alaala.

So there Manang Consuelo sat, face to face with S's grave. At some point, she had instructed the nurse to fetch the bouquet of flowers they brought at the back of the van. A large piece riddled with chrysanthemums and *sampaguitas*, like the plants that lined the greenery of their childhood home.

And unexpectedly — perhaps a product of her remaining grief— a significant weight fell on her clasped palms.

By her palms laced with the rosary she borrowed from the van's rearview mirror were the hands that took, whether for reasons justified. Calloused, with remnants of scars that she felt along the lines of his palms.

"Kuya, are you taking me to paradise, too?"

Dalisay

TRICIA SANDOVAL

Hindi pa man naipapanganak, maraming magulang ang nais malaman agad ang kasarian ng kanilang mga anak. Kasarian ang magdidikta ng kapalaran. Ika nga, ito ba'y tagapagmana o kahihiyan. Kahit walang muwang at 'di pa kumpleto, umusbong na rin ang takot sa puso ko. Mga magulang ko'y nalito, hindi malaman ang aking kasarian 'pagkat nakataob ang posisyon ko sa sinapupunan ni Mama. Sa araw na isinilang ako, wala na silang nagawa nang mapagtantong ako'y isang babae.

Kung akala ko'y nakahinga na ako, ang simpleng katotohanang *"babae ako"* ang siyang naging bara sa lalamunan ko mula noon hanggang ngayon.

Elementarya. Ika-anim na baitang, unang beses kong nakita na may bakas ng dugo sa 'king salawal. Kumabog ang dibdib ko, dali-daling nilabhan ang pambaba ko upang mabura ang mantsa. Imbis na sabihin kay Mama upang maibili ako ng *napkin* ay hindi ko ginawa. Natatakot ako na makialam na naman ang mga lola at mga tita. Lagi nilang bilin noon, ang unang dugo'y ipapahid sa mukha upang hindi magkatigyawat. Para sa akin, bahala na kung dumami ang tigyawat. Mapuno man ang mukha ko'y hinding-hindi ko idadait sa 'king pisngi ang malansang dugong galing sa loob ko.

Nakatapos ako ng elementarya, natuto na magnapkin at walang bakas ng tigyawat.

Hayskul. Minsan pang naituro sa amin ang mga tradisyon sa ibang bansa. Gumagawa sila ng paraan upang mapanatiling puro ang babae hanggang sa siya'y ikasal. Tulad ng *Female Genital Mutilation*, anong hawig ng ari ng babae sa isang tela upang ito'y hiwaan, gupitin, at tahiin? Minsan pa'y sa mismong gabi ng kasal saksi ang lahat, dangal kung ituring ang dugong magmamantsa sa kobre-kama. Nanlambot ang tuhod ko sa mga ganoong pangyayari, kung susumahin; iba't iba man ng sakit, lahat ito tumutumbok sa kahalagahan ng iyong pagkabirhen.

Ang pula, na s'yang kulay ng dugo't karahasan bakit ba balot nito ang buhay ng isang babae?

Kolehiyo. Kahit papaano'y napunta ako sa lugar na malaya akong maging ako. Ayaw ko sanang umalis dito ni isang segundo pero may pamilya pa rin akong dapat

uwian. May ngiti sa aking labi habang bumabyahe, ngunit naglaho rin sa puntong tumapak ako sa may pintuan namin. Walang *"I miss you"* na sumalubong sa akin kundi mga nagtataasang kilay.

Bakit daw ang ikli ng pambaba ko, halatang iba raw ang lakad ko, halatang hindi na puro sayang at Dalisay pa naman daw ang pangalan ko. Bakit daw ang dami kong tigyawat, kasalanan ko raw at hindi ako nagpahid ng dugo noon. Bakit daw ang dami kong kamot sa hita at binti, kasalanan ko raw at ang hilig kong magkamot ng balat tuwing nangangati.

Kailan pa lakad ang nagdikta ng pagiging puro? Walang ganoon. Kamot man kung tawagin wala itong kaugnayan sa pagkakamot. Bigla akong tumaba, nabanat ang balat ko. Kasabay nito naglabasan din ang tigyawat ko hindi dahil sa sinuway ko ang bilin nila kundi mayroon akong iniinda.

Kung kasarian nga ang magdidikta ng kapalaran, nakatakda ba talaga akong husgahan?

Fingers Crossed

FAITH MORALES

Walking, I keep on walking. All I can see is nothing, pitch dark. Is this the void? No, not yet. A ray of light is standing still, coming somewhere from above. My eyes can't make it out. I found myself climbing, reaching the source for the last time. This is the last time.

I flutter my eyes open, rubbing them to wake some sense. This is it, isn't it? After an eternity, I got out of bed and prepared everything for the finale. I stepped out of my now-closed room, the wind welcoming me with a cold, salty, gentle whisper, blowing my well-groomed hair and newly bought dress. The sky is at the crack of dawn and yet, not ready to welcome a brand-new morning. But the sun is already peeping, so I guess it shall be my only witness. Warm grains of sand embrace my toes while the waves desperately long to hold the now wet sand into its arms. Sweating, my feet proceeded towards the shoreline. This is my finale.

You might be wondering where it all started. Let's take a trip down my memory lane. That is if anything's still clear enough.

If I could cross my fingers one last time, what do I wish for?

16 or 17 years ago

Imagine yourself as a child playing with toy cars, kitchen sets, and/or passed-on barbie dolls. You may want to keep it to yourself, leave them anywhere, or break their hips accidentally or intentionally for fun, because why not? Was it fun to play by yourself? Of course, especially when everyone was busy working, doing chores, and studying. I was only 3 or 4 years old at that time, and those were the things I can at least vaguely remember. Oh! You know what, back then, I wished they will not shout at me whenever I play with the scissors on the sofa. I did not mean to make awful cuts whenever I twist, cross, or press my fingers together with the scissors on. I mean, I did not really know before that that was bad. But I already did it, anyway. Stupid hands. Oh! I remembered something! I watched it on the TV that if you put your middle finger across your index finger while making a wish, it is more likely to come true. But I have wished before, sometimes it happened, sometimes not. Anyhow, I crossed my middle fingers with my

index fingers tightly then. Well, you know, as a child, I said, if that was the case, I wanted our house to have stairs, like my playhouse!

14 years ago

I hated Math. My mom always got mad whenever we do Math. I wanted to draw or play with my Play-Doh. I had green, violet, orange, and pink! Nakikinig ka ba?! Burger would be fun to make with my plastic toy knives with different edges. One was a zigzag, and the other was a wave pattern. Tinuturuan ka nga para masagutan mo nang maayos yung test mo. Ano bang mahirap sa division, ha? If only Dr. Cia knew or at least explained to her that ADHD is not just hyperactivity. Or if I was as brilliant as my Ate, my mom will not be angry anymore. I crossed my left middle finger over my left index finger. I wished to be good at Math. No, scratch that. I wanted to be as intelligent as my sister! Yeah, right, slow brain. But seriously, why did everybody thought it was fantastic to skip a grade? Because, from Kinder, I became a Grade 1 student because of that test. Well, I got my first nosebleed because of that test. After all, a fist in your nose would draw blood, especially to one as young as me at that time.

13 years ago

Whenever I was asked even the simplest of a question, words vanished away. At least whenever I was talking to my mom. My mind went blank. Or even if I did have one, silence would be a more peaceful yet burning resolution, or else chaos is coming. If only I could draw what was inside my mind, maybe my mom won't be fumed anymore. But my hands just shivered, in pain, shock, anger, or disgust, who knows? I felt my eyes shook the waterworks off, but it flooded out. That next day, my whole body ached. But I had to go to school. So, I had to wear a jacket even if the sun braced us with her utmost warmth. But our adviser had insanely clear eyes. Did she always see through everything? We went to the Principal's Office, and their faces were twitched with worry and sadness in their eyes. They called for my sister, and they looked serious. We were about to go home when my Ate talked to me.

Bakit mo pinakita sa kanila? Gusto mo ba ikulong nila si Mama? Gusto mo ba makulong siya dahil sa'yo?

Hindi.

Sa susunod, itago mo maigi 'yan ha. Okay ka lang ba?

Of course, how I wished I felt better than ever. I was not able to bring my hands nor my fingers together. I was alone more than ever.

In the past 8 years ago, until the present

Bright eyes, contagious smiles...a warm aura, a bundle of joy, a magnet that charms everyone.
You're so enthusiastic, genuine, and candid! How do you do that?
She never ran out of stories, and she cracks the best jokes.
She's always there to listen.
I'm so lucky to have known you. Love you!
Congrats for making it through! I'm proud of you!

All the compliments and encouragements that I hear, all the people I love and hold dear, it's all I need to keep going. I was about to cross my middle fingers to my index fingers and make a wish when I thought, or should I say, a voice whispered. You don't deserve it. Then another. That is not true! And another. You? No way. And so many others. Too many. Too noisy. But, well, it's right because my friends don't know the truth. A fraud is what I am. Appearance isn't always the reality. You may look beautiful, but your attitude towards other people is trash. You may look happy, but something or someone is hurting you so deeply, yet you cannot afford to show it. The outer world doesn't equate to my inner world. What you see isn't what you get. Was that me being real? Or was it the facade I am trying so hard to fit in because I am too afraid to be unliked and hated by the people I care about? Do I even know the real value of care or even love? Or maybe, I am just pretending to know. I once wished for a miracle, you know. I wished that there should be no more spilled blood on my skin, no more bruises, no more sharp words, no more invalidation, no more hiding. I am not a voodoo doll, after all. What else do you seek for when you were younger? A decade has passed, almost two. I am a fully grown woman, they say. Time heals all wounds, they say. Is it?

Now, I wish...What do I wish for?

I wish the pain would go away. Please make it go away. But it didn't. It never did. It never will. Always there. Always have been. The cold envelops around my feet, my legs, my hips, my arms, my chest, and my head. Water fills me up like a sharp, manual mouth-inflating of a balloon. My well-groomed hair and newly bought dress are flowing, expressing their beauty for one last time. I am an anchor, joining the depths of darkness into the deep waters many have reached. Is this what I really want? Yes. No. Maybe. If I could cross my

fingers one last time, I wish this is not how it ends. I miss the warmth and the light, the breeze, the smiles and the laughs, the joy, the courage. I miss my family when they are not mad at me. I miss my high school and college friends who were always there for me. Yet I shut my eyes, breath suspended, as I wave my arms and conduct the finale. Return to the dark, now onto the void. Will I ever see them again? I could feel my left middle finger going across my left index finger. Do I hope so?

Holding Out for Sirens

FELISE CALZA

Debris stumbles on the palms I stretch out
As I reach for walls, or maybe a corner, a fence,
or anything broad enough to allow these echoes back to me
Nothing greets the fingers I then lay on my face from frustration

Tired from this lateral attempt,
I proceed to wash the aggravation off.
Again, nothing greets me
No puddle of water despite the rippling I hear
No handprints on the ground,
Not dirt and mud, not even weeds

Where do weeds come from? I do not know.
But at least we know how to dispose of them
Stories, on the other hand, do not cease
And the lies we tell outlive us.

We may ache, and ache
To reach out for more than ringing
But width, moisture, roots,
These will remain foreign to ignorant nail beds

Why do I not question how echoes go back to me?
Or my use of return rather than arrival.
There are no sirens
This is a vastness that is mine alone
Long since I've seen my lips move,
and I've forgotten that I am the one speaking.

Red dialogue boxes made in my head,
Sharp and stinging and social still,
I forget their baselessness
As I hold out.

When these callouses finally feel recollection
I hope I stop whispering myths,
and start screaming prophecies.
Then the echoes will reach me, not the opposite.

untapped magic and childlike faith

BIANCA CUSTODIO

When I was a child I used to think I could fly.

I believed I could, if only I tried hard enough. I believed in the stories on screen: of wizards and of fairies and heroes. And I decided I wanted to be one; that I could be one. That there just absolutely had to be a realm of magic lurking somewhere amidst our reality, merely untouched, unseen, unknown by the living. And so every night, after the busyness of home had finally lulled into a still hum, my family tucked and sound asleep, I would sneak strictly soundlessly down the stairs, holding my breath so as not to wake any living soul nor disturb any loitering ounce of magic. On all fours, I'd crawl across our tiny little living room and slowly work my way atop the big wooden storage box that sat still against our chipped cream colored wall. It was my grandmother's. It was also nearly half my height and strangely fuzzy in areas that I feel shouldn't have been. It was decaying, oh, for sure, but it stunk and screamed of magic. Standing atop its bumpy metal cover, I'd feel tall and towering and tough. And when I launched myself into the air, legs engaged, arms spread wide open, the wind sustaining my small, feeble, overly-excited body mid-air albeit only for a second or two, I'd feel I was unstoppable.

I want to say that it worked. That after countless nights of practice and of cyclical falling on my face, I flew, sometimes lingered in the air, my legs curled three feet away from the ground, for a few magical seconds. I was certain I would eventually get to flying across the room in a few months' time. My only real mistake was letting someone know. Because all of a sudden, when another pair of eyes lay witness to my hard-earned skill, the alleged magic would get up and leave my body. And with the wind missing and my body parts tense, embarrassed, and human, I would launch myself into not so much a freeing flight as into a sure hard, painful fall.

"You must have jinxed it," my cousin said to me, shrugging nonchalantly as she walked away after seeing what to her was another one of my dumb circus bits.

I jinxed it. The word rung inside me for days. It was the first I had ever heard of it.

A jinx brought bad luck, I learned, it replaced magic with misery. But my family and I were not supposed to believe in luck. We believed in blessing. At every meal, we would hold hands together in prayer to ask for blessing, not luck. At every recital, my parents never wished me "good luck". Instead, they'd cheer me on with a "God bless!" in a chipper

hope and certainty. My grandma always warned me against this luck; she said believing in it would only bring about consequence and a cancellation of the blessings already en route to me. I'd never realized how ironic that was, but still, I always found it quite beautiful. I was careful not to wish any of my friends luck, good or not, and I prayed for deliberate blessings and never meaningless luck, and knew they'd always find their way to me somehow. After all, blessings were meant to be definite and luck was always unreliable.

And so I refused to believe in it; it would simply make no sense to believe that I had 'jinxed' the magic away. That the wind had left and my bones shriveled simply because 'bad luck' had scared it away. I refused to believe it. Yet, still, I never found it in myself to climb atop the shaggy, magical wooden box to fly again. Maybe it was to avoid reliving the embarrassment of falling dangerously and shamelessly hard in front of a person who didn't believe in my magic in the first place, or maybe it was because I subconsciously and secretly feared the jinx in any way, shape, or form, but I decided I would never dare speak about, reveal, nor put to light any of the magic I sought after lest they were finished and ready and real.

And it became a habit, a subtle part of my lifestyle, my mantra: my lips remain sealed until any magic I dare find comes successfully to life. So instead, for years I directed all my secret wishes and worries up in hushed whispers to the God I was taught to believe in, in hopes that the blessings would come safely my way, clean of lucks, of jinxes, and of any other wary, witnessing eyes. So I dreamt, ventured, leapt for this magic I was so desperate to find alone. But it didn't always work, no.

My family and I later grew out of our busy little home, and my shaggy magical wooden box became a mere '*vintage*' item amongst our vast collection of things to give away and to forget about. We moved into a small shoebox apartment in the middle of the city, and I soon forgot all about flying. The magic I sought after became of a different kind: invisible, often out of reach; Of dreams, feelings of fulfillment, friendships, the most simple of happiness. So I taught myself to leap from the invisible boxes scattered in all the different corners of my life, towards childish dreams and artistic ventures and human titles and recognition and comfort and being seen by people I loved and having a permanent place in the lives of those that I cared to be loved by.

But as it turns out, all kinds of magic required of me a certain faith. And I found myself falling to my knees more times than I'd ever care to admit, the wind still knocked from underneath me, my body tense, embarrassed, and human all the same. I collected bruises and wounds and hidden disappointments and picked up all my shattered, fallen pieces in

secrecy. I learned to fear both blessing and luck slipping through my fingers. And at some point, I stopped leaping.

When I was a child, I was sure that growing up meant becoming more certain certain of what you want, where you're going, what's important, what you believe in, and certain most importantly of yourself. But I've only begun to realize that it was the exact opposite. Because there are only so much falls you can take before you start thinking that maybe magic never existed in this reality in the first place. That maybe blessings are only synonymous to luck after all or that superstitions somehow work more than prayer and that you'd gotten it all mixed up since the beginning. Or that maybe *nothing* works at all. Except you. And your own wonder and grit and recklessness. Or maybe even your faith, the right kind: unwavering and unbothered and childlike and sure.

Maybe if I were still a child, I could believe that I could fly, and I would actually do it. Maybe if I were still a child, I could still stand tall and towering and tough. Maybe if I were still a child, I could jump, my trust in the wind and my arms spread freely open, without any fear of what coldness, what pain I could feel if I found myself face first on the ground. Maybe if I were still a child, I would simply choose to get right back up because I can. And I would try again and I would continue to believe that magic exists, never once taking my wounds nor my bruises nor anybody's words as proof that it doesn't and that I can't.

But I'm not a child anymore. And I want to say that I have this all figured out now, but I don't. And I want to say that I'm certain I will figure it all out someday, but I don't want to jinx it.

Ghosts

JECKO SANJORJO

Come the way you know how:
without a compass, a trail, a sense of destination.
Remember when we danced in the living room,
swaying with the curtains that billow like wraiths?
The way the floor was paved, smooth
upon the bare soles of our feet,
bringing us through corridors and hallways and rooms
and fortresses of our own making.

(It was as if the house
walked on us,
on our feet,
and not us,
with our feet, on it.)

We existed freely, yellow bells that hang
in the garden, dew from the windows that perspired,
ice that melts until it knows no identity.
We moved with ease.
We moved on earth and air and water.
Material, immaterial, elemental — Free.

Remember when you would stretch out,
in your sleep, and reach
for me? There was fear in your fingertips,
and insecurity.
As if you don't trust me to remain material,
like condensed air of the early morning chill.
I am your transcendent ghost, and I
remain where you are, singing to you, unreal.

Love, this is but a dream within a dream
and I held you, your north star, your beam.

I will be where you want me to be.
Before you. Beside you. Behind.
Between your lovely thighs. Be it as it may,
I am there, soothing you with tender sin.
You are my only devastation,
and in the absence of our hushed worship,
breathe me in.

It costs us too much to breathe the same air,
to coexist where approximation is nothing
but a silly word, an alien concept, the space
where the atoms of our beings do not touch,
as we embrace and bask in the sun
as if it is ours.

(And because no one understands distance
better than we do.
Because distance is all that we have,
and distance will be all that remains.)

So come to me the way you know how.
How to begin? I think it is best
to set your foot forward now.
Towards home. To me, and call out,
your name. Reveal yourself to me.
I will be happy to close the distance,
the way we know how.

The ***UPLB Writers' Club*** is a non-profit organization of young writers and literature enthusiasts based in University of the Philippines Los Banos, Laguna. Founded in the 1970s, the organization has since then marshalled its efforts to promote meaningful and socially relevant literature inside and outside the university.

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